

Promoting Ethics Awareness: Utah Valley University Experience

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IV Alumna - MRP "Accountability in Government and Business"

February 10-March 5, 2009

One of the major responsibilities of an ombudsman is to promote ethical awareness among political office holders and government officials. To successfully do so, however, one must start with young people. Therefore, an ombudsman works to promote ethical awareness both among political office holders and government officials as well as children.

There are many ways to promote such awareness among children. In this chapter, I will write about the experience I have gained from my visit to Utah Valley University under the International Visitor Leadership Program, February 12- March 5, 2009. The subject of my visit was "Accountability in Government and Business I". I had a chance to visit both governmental and private organizations in several U.S. states dealing with ethical awareness. Utah Valley University is one of the institutions that have successfully promoted such awareness, not only among its students and faculty, but also the general public who are invited to participate in their activities throughout the year.

Center for the Study of Ethics

The Center for the Study of Ethics under the jurisdiction of Utah Valley University is responsible for ethical study. Before graduating from the university, every student must have taken a course in ethical study. The center's objective is to promote ethical awareness and ethical education among university students and faculty as well as the Utah Valley community. The center also organizes lectures, seminars, workshops and other activities in which the local community can participate.

The center is comprised of three parts:

1. The Executive Committee. The committee's responsibility is to ensure that the center's day-to-day operations run well and in line with its goals.
2. Ethics Across the Curriculum Faculty Advisory Committee (EACFAC). Comprising of representatives from various university departments, EACFAC provides counseling in curriculum development, selects students for scholarships and identifies subjects for the annual summer seminars.
3. Community Advisory Board (CAB). Comprising of community leaders, activists, academics and other professionals, CAB provides advice on community needs – information which will be used to develop the center's curriculum and activities. CAB also selects winners of the annual Excellence in Ethics Award.

Ethics Across the Curriculum

The Center for the Study of Ethics has developed an ethical study curriculum called Ethics Across the Curriculum. One of the subjects taught is “Ethics and Values” which all students in the university must take. Other subjects currently being taught include “Ethics in Business”, “Ethics in Environment”, etc.

The objectives of Ethics Across the Curriculum are:

1. Students will be able to exchange their thoughts on ethical issues and understand them from different perspectives.
2. Students will be able to understand the integration of multidisciplinary studies. Subjects focused include philosophy, liberal arts, religion and history.
3. Students will improve their writing skills which will help them better express themselves.
4. Students will develop analytical thinking and classroom discussion skills.
5. Students will develop critical thinking skills and be able to comment on the ethical concepts of philosophers, writers and academics.

Ethical Teaching in schools (from kindergarten to high school levels)

The Center for the Study of Ethics offers a training program for teachers from kindergarten to high school levels. The program is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The training program includes:

1. A five-day seminar on basic knowledge on ethics.
2. A monthly meeting for participating teachers for a period of 12 months.
3. Setting up a regulatory committee, comprising members from Utah Valley University, students’ parents and representatives from the areas where teachers work. The committee is to provide advice to schools on how to implement ethical study courses.

Activities to promote ethical awareness

- Seminars. Subjects for past seminars included ethics in business, ethics in the environment and religion and perspectives toward nature.
- Ethics Awareness Weeks. In September of every year, the Center for the Study of Ethics organizes different activities to promote ethical awareness. University departments are urged to suggest topics for discussions by faculty, students, university staff and community members. Topics discussed included Ethics of Prize Dog Fighting: The Recuperation of Michael Vick’s Fighting Dogs, Ethics of Personal Electronics in the Class, Ethical Philosophy of Robert Solomon, the Dalai Lama, etc.

Excellence in Ethics Awards

The Excellence in Ethics Award is an annual award for people considered a role model in ethics and ethics promotion. The Community Advisory Board selects recipients from among community members in the state of Utah. A list of award recipients includes Chief Justice of Utah State Supreme Court Michael Zimmerman, Director of University of Utah’s Bennion Center Irene Fisher, Utah Humanities Council Executive Director Delmont Oswald, etc.

Annual summer seminars

Summer seminars are held by the Center for the Study of Ethics every year. The center provides funding to university departments to co-host the seminars. Nationally renowned academics and experts are invited to participate in these seminars. Past seminar topics included basic concept of ethics and professional and social ethics.

Promoting ethics in the community

The Center for the Study of Ethics sends speakers from Utah Valley University to talk on ethical issues in the community. Topics include medical, environmental and business ethics. In addition, the center has asked nationally renowned scholars to write books and articles on ethical issues to be distributed to the public. It also provides funding for Utah Valley University's programs on ethics as well as those organized at the state and national levels.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

I think the experiences from Utah Valley University are useful and can be applied to several aspects of an ombudsman's work. I strongly agree with the idea of engaging local communities in promoting ethical awareness since it not only creates accountability in a community but also emphasizes that ethics is a responsibility shared by all community members.

The Office of the Ombudsman can also organize certain activities similar to those held by the Center for the Study of Ethics. It may launch an Ethics Awareness Week once a year or four times a year, each time by region. The Office of the Ombudsman may also ask other agencies such as the National Anti-Corruption Commission, who has similar responsibilities, or academic institutions to co-host this activity.

The Office of the Ombudsman is also planning to give awards to people with outstanding ethics in FY 2010. It may adopt the same format used by Utah Valley University by inviting community members to help select award recipients.

The Office of the Ombudsman also has a program to promote ethical awareness in academic institutions. It may follow Utah Valley University's approach by joining forces with colleges and universities to organize activities for students. In addition, it may suggest that the Ministry of Education include ethical study in its curriculum for all levels of education.

Utah Valley University's activities show that promoting ethical awareness must be done continuously and constantly. Furthermore, in the university's view, ethics is not only limited to honesty and personal behavior but is also one's responsibility to fellow human beings and the world.
